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Cinderella or Cyberella? Empowering Women in the Knowledge Society

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narrow personal benefit ahead of those of the collective. Last but not least, a better-financed and more independent local authority must move decisively to combat the causes of corruption. The authors admit, however, that even after installing efficient control systems and a culture of democracy, improved levels of transparency and accountability necessary to prevent corruption in areas where it is the norm are not likely to change entrenched practices and attitudes for a long time.

'The Role of Development Cooperation', the final chapter, is the *raison d'être* for the book. In it the authors offer seven strategic reasons for giving 'specific and increased' support to urban development. I abridge these below:

1. Developing countries are becoming more urbanised; urban conditions will determine future economic, cultural, and social conditions.
2. Urban poverty is high and increasing.
3. Environmental problems of cities are diverse and related to a range of factors, including poverty, economic growth, and consumption patterns. They must be dealt with in place.
4. Up to two-thirds of most countries' GDP is generated in urban centres. Improved planning, governance, infrastructure, and land use promote economic development for both the poor and non-poor.
5. Urban development serves rural development, by creating markets for agricultural products, higher incomes for rural–urban migrants, and transfer payments to the countryside, raising per capita incomes in the latter.
6. Cultural development – information transfer, educational opportunities, and innovation – originates in urban centres but benefits the whole country.
7. HIV/AIDS is prevalent in urban areas and is a threat to overall development.

The link between strategic reasons for support to urban development and international co-operation are not explicit in this formulation. However, the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) do commit the international community to a time-bound poverty-alleviation effort, with specific urban components: to significantly improve the lives of 100 million slum dwellers by 2020. As the authors acknowledge, this means also to prevent the formation of new slums housing some 600 million persons by the same date. This is indeed a tall order.

To have any hope of achieving such a goal, a massive transformation in the way that cities are governed and built will have to occur. Yet in their conclusion the authors state that the situation in the urban areas and the conditions of the urban poor are not fully appreciated or addressed in the poverty-alleviation strategies being prepared by most developing countries (p.152). The implication is that efforts to meet the MDG for slums could fail for want of proper direction within, and assistance to, the recipient countries.

> *Many think that the costs for slum upgrading are astronomic. However, less than USD 20 billion is required annually to reach MDG target 11 and also prevent the formation of new slums. This represents 10 percent of current aggregate investments in housing. Claims on ODA would be USD 5.5 billion [annually], which is 8 percent of total ODA for 2003.* (p.161)

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Nancy J. Hafkin and Sophia Huyer (eds.)
Cinderella or Cyberella? Empowering Women in the Knowledge Society
Bloomfield, Connecticut: Kumarian Press, 2006, ISBN: 1565492196, 220 pp.

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What do information and communications technologies (ICTs) mean for women across the world, and what kinds of barrier exist to impede women's full empowerment in the digital age? These are two major questions addressed in multifaceted ways by this authoritative and rich collection of essays, which are written accessibly and clearly enough to be of use to the widest audience: students, academics, and policy makers at all levels.

The book is edited by two leading researchers in the field, which makes it distinctive in terms of its comprehensiveness, structure, and diversity of content. It moves seamlessly between macro policy considerations and micro illustrations, grounding its larger arguments usefully in concrete examples from different geographical contexts. It outlines how perceptive work on ICT developments and information-society issues in general is being conducted through a gender lens and with the deep sociological awareness that this brings. In other words, this volume is striking in the way that it locates ICTs within existing social conditions, thereby avoiding the hyperbole and abstraction that too much of the literature on ICTs has fallen victim to.

The collected chapters make clear the extent to which the potential of ICTs for any social group can be seriously understood only by considering what may inhibit or enable its use of them, and that these factors are socio-economic and cultural and relate to limitations in both policy and the data on which it is based. While this volume focuses on gender inequalities, its points are indicative for our broader analysis of issues of inclusion and exclusion in the information society. It is proof that some of the most useful and historically informed analysis of these issues is being undertaken by experts in the field of gender and ICT, who understand technologies not in reductive instrumental ways, but as integral aspects of socio-political, economic, and cultural developments, influenced by and influencing how these are shaped and to whose advantage or disadvantage they work most.

The co-written introduction and the two opening chapters by Huyer and Hafkin, as well as one on 'Engendering ICT Policy and Regulation' by Sonia Jorge, set the general scene for the detailed chapters that follow, focusing on education (Huyer again), and case studies drawn from Africa, Asia, and Latin America. The book fulfils the helpful dual function of mapping both the inhibitions that constrain women's progress in the ICT environment, and the empowerment of women through ICTs that is already well underway across the world.

The introduction captures the current scenario succinctly: 'ICTs are not a magic wand or Cinderella's scepter that will do away with centuries of discrimination and inequality. It is not the technology itself that will empower women' (p.2). But the nature of the technology itself is important, especially for women, because ICTs 'have characteristics and properties that go directly to the roots of women's inequality by transcending invisibility and hierarchy while offering access to information and an escape from cultural isolation' (p.3).

I commend the subtlety with which the book negotiates both the complexities of the inequalities of the past that partly shape the ICT setting, and the new possibilities that these technologies offer for the present and future, for women as much as for men. The collection picks up familiar digital-divide themes: education; science and technology training; access to ICTs, particularly in rural areas. It provides an up-to-date picture of policy and practice developments in these areas.

Huyer's first chapter, 'Understanding Gender Equality and Women's Empowerment in the Knowledge Society', leads into the collection with an excellent overview of gender and technology issues, emphasising women's unequal access to resources, including ICTs; their lower levels of access to education; and their lower rates of literacy in text as well as computers and technology. Huyer's second chapter, 'Cyberella in the Classroom?', in

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addition to focusing on the enduring problem of gender inequality in science and technology education, makes the crucial and broader related point that girls frequently find it hard to relate to these areas at all. 'Many studies show that girls are turned off early on by the intensely masculine nature of technology' (p.99).

Hafkin's chapter entitled 'Women, Gender, and ICT Statistics and Indicators' makes the vital point that a major problem in addressing gender inequalities related to ICTs is a basic lack of gender-disaggregated data, especially in the South. Such data are a powerful means by which policy shifts can be achieved. 'Where the gender digital divide is generally thought to be most marked, virtually no official statistics are available. It is also in these countries that the digital divide is hardest to document' (p.52). The limited data on women in high-level computer science and engineering research and employment indicate that women's presence remains low. Women tend to be concentrated in comparatively low-level support functions such as word processing, with fewer working as programmers and systems analysts and the smallest number as software and hardware engineers (p.59).

The point explored by Huyer in her opening chapter – that real ICT empowerment for women involves them as shapers and definers of the information society in technology and policy terms, as much as users – remains key to greater gender equality in this area in the future. This collection presses all the right buttons on the big points and includes varied examples: a mix that makes it a satisfying and highly informative as well as enjoyable read. I congratulate the editors in particular for bringing to readers a high-quality volume that scores as much for its breadth as its depth, and for its ability to stimulate and challenge. I have no doubt that it will make a difference to the quality of academic and policy debate.

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